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TEACHING AND TIME

Some notes for discussion read at the Ambleside Conference

by E. L. MOLYNEUX (C.M.C.)

It should not be long now before I am back at work; but that is no consolation for missing the Conference! I do know, however, that I shall gather from the P.U.S. staff and from colleagues who were more fortunate, many of the bright threads of thought and friendship now being spread through and round our work at its core—this lovely place, Ambleside, which was chosen by our founder as a home of philosophy and activity and has been cherished by many others in many capacities. In this context at this Conference, it will be of Miss Kitching that we shall be thinking most: how bright are the threads of thought and friendship she handed to us!

Not knowing how your discussions are starting or developing I can offer nothing more than notes which may contribute to your deliberations, so I have chosen a few small subjects which are, however, important to the teacher as a craftsman—a worthy member of a profession.

From the Conference Programme it is clear that time will be given to philosophical and theoretical subjects; that is as it should be, but I am not sure that we always maintain the lifeline between (a) theory, and (b) practice; without (b) (a) is sterile, and without (a) (b) is of very poor quality indeed. In this we are particularly fortunate because, if we trouble to search, we can invariably find some informing idea in Charlotte Mason's books to bring freshness when our teaching goes stale or wrong. This piece of good fortune has its snag: we do sometimes forget that an amiable and amorphous practice of principles we know to be sound, does not exempt us from the need to know how to do our job efficiently. We must establish good class management, natural and unconsidered discipline, orderly written work, easy arrangements for relaxing and changing lessons and many other details, including manners: the sarcastic schoolmarm is fast disappearing, I am glad to say, but I sometimes wonder whether her place is not being taken by someone too good-mannered to see that her pupils treat *her* with good manners!

For my examples I will confine myself to something demanding a teachers's care and thoughtful pride—the use of time. When our pupils' understanding, achievement and zest slump, it may well be that a survey of how lesson hours are actually spent will reveal the *whole* cause of the malady. Any of us with experience of watching others teach knows how commonly the fault lies here and how very difficult it is to say so—except, of course, to students, in practice! It is far too common to see the ardent enthusiast for letting each pupil in a class proceed mathematically at his own pace, deprive each one of up to a third of every arithmetic lesson by having to explain individually where and how to begin (a lack of preparation) and by foolish arrangements for correcting exercise books in class. (Why do so few of us keep the class sitting and move round among them?) I once witnessed an arithmetic class in which fourteen out of nineteen of Form IIB were fidgeting in a queue by the teacher's desk, and another, which you will find hard to credit, where, when A got 'stuck' he went to the corner of the classroom, picked up a comic and passed the time with it, waving one hand in the air (a matter of strict scrupulosity) until the teacher called him to her desk to help him. 'But', I was subsequently informed, 'it's quite all right you see because we have *an hour's* Number, it's so important and we don't find P.U.S. give *nearly* enough time to it.' You may rightly think, 'Why at a conference on how to do things in Charlotte Mason's way is she stressing something that is not peculiar to our work either in principle or practice?' I have done so to make the point that it is important that we know and practice the basic rules for conducting schoolrooms in a business-like manner. Unless we do so, no intrinsic quality of how and what we study can truly flourish.

To come nearer home : how does time get wasted in literary subjects dependent on reading and narration in its various forms? Lack of preparation, once again, is usually responsible, though an ephemeral enthusiasm or the gullibility of the teacher and the contrivance of his pupils may well lead him down a side track out of sight of the main road ; a peep down the track might have been legitimate and profitable, but no more than a peep. Preparing a literary lesson, whatever the subject, need not take long, but it must take place and be quite definite, and these are some of the things to be considered.

*What is the subject of this lesson?* When *Lands of the Commonwealth* was on the curriculum, some schools failed to get through the work set for IIB because they forgot it was a Citizenship book—a study of how other people live ; they spent too much time on too much, too advanced, map work, and gave none to Citizenship at all.

*What is the aim of the lesson?* It may be perfectly obvious, but it should be in the teacher's mind and put to the test at the end of the lesson by considering whether what has passed has achieved that aim.

*How shall we start?* A class question (ask the whole class and select one to answer ; too often it happens the other way round and only one person has been required to think) as to how far you got last time is often sufficient to forge the link. In Form I the children need to be trained gently away from re-narrating the whole of the last lesson ; above Form I such a practice is sheer waste of time, except possibly in the case of a usually silent pupil suddenly beginning to narrate. In the upper school

it may be proper to recall more than the tail-end of the last lesson. Have ready some exercise in a fresh form: a summary of headings, out-standing facts to be marshalled, a look at a map or discussion over diagrams, and do make certain that the exercise is something for the whole class to do, preferably together, and is exhilarating.

*What skill or information must the teacher provide?* This may mean putting new proper names on the board and learning to read them with ease; it may be explanation of a difficult term; it may be finding places in the atlas or dates in the date book or Century Books: it may be a hundred-and-one other things, but it may *not* be a précis from the teacher of what the teacher and the class are about to read together, leaving nothing to be discovered. I cannot over-emphasise the value of two or three well-prepared minutes spent in this way. Their fruition is to be seen in the narration; without them it will be of the kind which earns from the examiner 'would be very good if names included', 'manner good, matter weak', or even that depressing 'useless without names or dates'. With this preparation the boys and girls have, as it were, the pegs on which to hang their narration. They speak with fluency because they do not have to break a chain of thought to search for a name (if they hesitate a colleague will be champing to supply it). Most important of all perhaps, it will not be necessary for the prepared teacher to break off during reading from the book to introduce something he has forgotten to explain earlier: this is tantamount, in the sphere of mind-activity, to interrupting a distinguished lecturer or chipping in during a musical performance with the name of the piece and the composer which have been inadvertently left out of the programme!

In the middle and upper schools I believe more use could be made of schoolroom time for quick rough work: ten minute reports in pencil, copying quickly or sketching from memory a diagram (too many diagrams are painstakingly copied neatly, e.g., *Life and Her Children* in Nature Note Books), drawing a rough map from memory to illustrate a specific point, listing, in rough, constituents of the lesson or fresh examples; none of these brief written exercises can be done without more extensive mental exercise. Perhaps this is a point which you will discuss. It bears relation to Miss Wix's invaluable article on Narration in the February *Parents' Review*; she has been more constructive in her theme and has surveyed the subject more widely than I have.

By this time some of you may be wondering whether I am urging a sort of hectic haste in our teaching. If I am giving that impression it is diametrically opposed to the one I wish to give, which is that if the habits and manners of the classroom are time and labour-saving, no flurry in the wake of the clock is necessary. To achieve a tradition of economic procedure, preparation and thought are necessary at the level of the individual class teacher, at the level of the head of the school and, on other aspects of the same question, in conference together.

On the other hand, while we are on the subject of time, don't let us forget that children are beings of quicksilver and lightning; they love to run, to flash, to leap, to dash, to race. So let them in school hours enjoy training in speed and accuracy. Give them brief but thrilling races, competitions, activities; these, ephemeral and of slight value in themselves, are stimulating and educational *qua* training and most enjoyable. This

sort of thing is for the unexpected occasion, time to spare, a wet afternoon, the end of a hard and dull struggle ; anything more frequent leads boys and girls into mistaking the satisfaction of leading a spelling bee, or an obstacle race or a French verb test for the real sense of achievement of growth in knowledge or the solution of the stubbornly insoluble. All good modern Heads take the zest for competitive striving for granted, but even in P.N.E.U. schools where *An Essay Towards a Philosophy of Education* (page 85) is well known, this natural exuberance is unworthily turned towards prizes, marks and stars which are harmless red herrings at the best and dissimulators and progenitors of a shallow sense of values at the worst. Head a cross-country race, earn a prize, of course ; win a tennis tournament, receive a cup. Well done, your practice, training, determination and natural aptitude have been successfully harnessed for a purpose. Receive a prize, or a gold star (one probably of a large number) for history, at say the age of ten, what gilding of the lily of a piece of very good work ! And those of you who don't believe, do talk with those who do ; maybe they can persuade you that real satisfaction does come to John when he can go home and say he has got 'Excellent' for his arithmetic, and also, honorably, to Joan who, after weeks and weeks of 'Poor' and 'Fair', goes home and announces the achievement of a 'Good' ; and the value of that achievement is recognisable all round. (This does, of course, necessitate a regular and business-like use of 'Remarks' throughout the school).

Here, then, are some talking points ; you will find many others, and then give and take will enrich these hours of discussions.

## THE HONEY BEE

by RUTH CAREY (C.M.C.)

'Although the honey bee has engaged the attention of many from the earliest ages, recent discoveries prove that we are yet only beginning to arrive at a correct knowledge of their wonderful proceedings'.

Honey, the product of bees, is often mentioned in the Bible, the first time being in about the eighteenth century B.C., when Jacob sent a gift to the ruler of Egypt, Joseph.

'Take of the best fruits in the land in your vessels and carry down the man a present, a little balm, and a little honey, spices, and myrrh, nuts and almonds'.

St. John the Baptist is said to have lived in the wilderness on locusts and wild honey.

Astromachus of Soles and Philiscus the Thracian studied bees for the greater part of their lives, but it is from Virgil that we know most of the ancient theories about these interesting insects. Many of his directions about apiculture are still of use to-day and are very beautiful.

Until sugar was introduced into England, honey was the chief sweetener, and apiaries in the form of a collection of straw skeps were more abundant in those days than they are now.